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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that dialect is used in children's books to suggest the geographic background, social class, educational level, and intelligence of literary characters. Several studies show, however, that young readers develop negative attitudes about characters who speak nonstandard dialects and that these attitudes are intensified if the readers themselves speak a nonstandard dialect. These negative attitudes are partially due to the literary use of "eye dialect," where the author misspells words to convey variant speech patterns. To children, spelling errors reflect low intelligence or undesirability in the character. In addition, the use of literary dialect assumes some sense of amused superiority on the part of the conventional speaker who relates it; dialect divides people into classes. While researchers argue for and against the use of literary dialect in children's books, additional research is needed to determine the total impact of dialect usage on impressionable readers. (MAI)

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Robin L. Carr

Dialect in Children's Literature: An Issue of Importance

> Since language is a form of social behavior, we react to a person's speech patterns as we would react to any of his actions. If his dialect differs from our own, we may consider him quaint, naive, cultivated, conceited, alien, or any number of things. Most frequently, however, our attitude toward the outsider tends to be negative since, after all, he is not one of "our group." (15:2)
>
> - Roger Shuy

Dialect has long been used in literature for many different purposes, most of them artistic. All too often, however, dialect is used to produce judgmatic sneers and to draw derisive laughter toward specific characters. Indeed, authors seem at times to use dialect as a tool to present certain racial, ethnic, or national groups as different from the supposed norm and thus as undesirable.

Henry Nash Smith (17:279-280), a well-known literary critic, attests to this misuse of dialect in fiction when he states:

> We are familiar with the role of dialect in the tradition of Cooper, and indeed in sentimental fiction generally, as a simple unambiguous badge of status. No straight character could be allowed to speak dialect and every character who used dialect was instantly recognizable as having a low social rank. In books of more or less direct reporting, . . . the upper-class observer regales his presumably upper-class readers by rendering the

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speech of the natives as a foil for his own elegant rhetoric. Stories such as Z. Hutchinson's "Epaminondas" with its crude stereotyped illustrations and "yassah, massah" dialectal vocabulary (8:102-108) and the Nancy Drew books in which blacks say "troff," "lawdy," and "shet da do," are examples of this literary abuse of dialect.

In research presently being conducted by the authors, certain patterns governing the relationship between dialect and characters in children's books are emerging. Chief among these seem to be the assignation of nonstandard dialectal speech to:

a. non-whites more often than to whites
b. persons of the lower socio-economic level more often than to those from the upper and middle levels
c. foreign born more often than to native born persons
d. southerners and westerners more often than to persons from other geographic regions
e. men more often than to women
f. older persons more often than to the young
g. characters with little education more often than to the educated
h. characters whose intelligence is suggested as being low more often than to those who are suggested as possessing a high intelligence level
i. the antagonist more often than to the protagonist

This research indicates that dialect is indeed used to suggest geographic background, social class level, educational level, and the intelligence of literary characters.

Even greater power is ascribed to written representations of dialect by William Anderson and Patrick Groff (1:25,26), who write, "Various attitudes and kinds of personality can be associated with a dialect. Through a dialect, the author can delineate a character with a certain kind of personality." Would Anderson and Groff have us believe there is a direct and provable relationship between specific dialects and specific attitude or personality patterns?

Such a causal relationship is suggested when they state that Tolkein's use of the cockney dialect for the trolls' speech in The Hobbit is the major technique used to "create a picture of dissipated, snarling, pirate types, with a jug of grog between them." Surely dialect has made the trolls colorful and memorable, but much of their gruffness and dissipated nature is revealed by Tolkein's physical description alone rather than by his use of dialect for their speech. Perhaps Anderson and Groff suggest that, to them, characters who speak a cockney dialect must always snarl, be dissipated and drink grog.

The power of suggestion attributed to the cockney dialect serves to point out the basic problem inherent in the literary use of dialect. This problem involves the attitudes, learned or inherent, which the reader brings to literature. Attitudes about nonstandard dialects and the speakers of such dialects would obviously be included in the psychological sets which influence the reader's evaluation of a book and its characters.

That the reader may actually form mental pictures, not only of the physical being, but also of the personalities of characters in literature is supported by the studies of Lee O. Prouko and N. H. Thayer (13:113-117) and (14:51-59). Indeed, their findings indicate that readers were able to discuss such images even when the excerpts read were devoid of physical description of the characters and of their personalities. It is suggested that readers form positive and negative attitudes about literary characters based on the language assigned to and setting surrounding such characters.

In attitudinal studies by Robin Carr (2:79-86) and Sue Ann Peterson (12:111), sixth grade students were found to react more negatively toward literary characters represented as speaking nonstandard English than toward the same characters when the dialogue was written into standard English. A second finding of Carr's study reported that lower class girls reacted more negatively toward dialectal material than did any other socio-economic sub-group. This finding is supported by Deutsch's study (5:78-88) which reported that those most negative toward nonstandard speech were those people who spoke a nonstandard dialect.

A third finding of the Carr study is that children are less negative toward spoken dialect than they are toward written representations of the same dialect. This finding implies that there is something inherent in the techniques required to suggest dialect in the written mode which evokes negative connotations toward that speech. Could it be that these negative connotations are then transferred to the speakers themselves?

Part of the difficulty may lie in the author's use of "eye dialect," a written technique of "misspelling" words so as to visually alert the reader that the speaker is different. Misspellings such as "sez," "bekuz," and "wuz" can only be used for this purpose because phonologically they sound the same as "says," "because," and "was" and thus are ineffective as indicators of a variant speech.

It could be that, when children read literature containing "eye dialect," they notice the "misspelled" words, and, applying the conditioning of the spelling class, use them as indicators of the intelligence or lack of general quality in the speaker. Perhaps the reader is not aware of the device as a literary tool and actually attributes the misspelling to the character and considers him a "country yokel," unintelligent, or even undesirable.

Misspelling to suggest phonological variance is not the only problem associated with the use of dialect in books for children. Consider also the social connotations and feelings caused by vocabulary differences among language varieties. Expressions like "The Man," "Honkey," and "Darky" found in books such as Lipsyte's The Contender (10:22-3) and swearing presented in the Cleavers' The Mimosa Tree (4:80) have elicited very quick negative response from many college students and sixth graders with whom I have worked. The reaction to the first two words seems to be a racial one while the reaction to the swearing seems to be conditioned by school and home against such vocabulary. The major point to make here is that

the reactions seem to transcend the language used by a literary character and to attribute to him such qualities as vulgarness, quaintness, stupidness, evilness, or aggressiveness, all attributes which enable one to justify negative feelings toward the character. James Sledd writes that language differences are used by man as tools, to claim and proclaim his identity, while society uses them to keep him under control. The person who talks right, as we do, is one of us. The person who talks wrong is an outsider, strange and suspicious, and we must make him feel inferior if we can. (16:1308)

Although this article points out many of the difficulties involved in using written representations of dialect, I believe the following quotations highlight the essence of the issue.

> In all use of dialect there is probably present some sense of amused superiority on the part of the conventional speaker as he views the forms of dialect speech . . . ."(9:229)
>
> - George Krapp

> [The black parent should] . . . take special pains to see that he and his children destroy this last chain that binds him to the past, the Negro dialect. (7:82)
>
> - Gordon Green

> . . . I have not chosen anywhere in this record to set people apart by their speech, for that speech was the expression of their feelings, their anxieties, which would only be hidden from you in

dialect, and I do not deal with the world divided into classes--of gentry and yokels--but one of human creatures under the same sentence of life, their doom and their delight. (3:26)

- Joyce Cary

Here then are strong supporters for the eradication of literary dialect and indeed even of spoken nonstandard dialect. The opposing view can be seen in the following statements of two eminent linguists, Wayne O'Neil and Joshua Fishman:

Eradicate the language prejudice, the language mythology, that people grew into holding and believing. For there is clear evidence that the privileged use their false beliefs about language to the disadvantage of the deprived. One way to stop this is to change nonstandard dialect speakers into standard dialect speakers, at least for some of the time, i.e., when the nonstandards are in the presence of the standards, currying favor of them, etc. This seems to me intolerable if not impossible. Another response to language differences would to be educate (especially the people in power) for tolerance of differences, for an understanding of differences. This could be naturally done, easily done in elementary schools, but only by teachers who are themselves free of language prejudice. (11:15)

Ethnicity is still so uncomfortable and guilt-laden an area for the essentially middle-class public school teacher, principal, superintendent, and curriculum expert that it is less objectional

to cut pupils off from deep understanding and appreciation than to give ethnically based linguistic and cultural methods their due recognition. (6:387)

Literary dialect is an important issue in the field of children's literature today. Hopefully, much research will be done and much light shed on how best to write for young people.

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